

**Department of Commerce
Occupational Safety and Health Program
Report**



October 2005

**Department of Commerce
Office of Occupational Safety and Health
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Executive Summary

The monthly Occupational Safety and Health report provides an overview of the effectiveness of the Department's Occupational Safety and Health program. The report is based on the latest available data for the Department derived from employee compensation claims and results of bureau evaluations.

Work continues on the accident reporting system for the Department. The accident log for Calendar Year 2004 is partially complete. When completed, Calendar Year 2004 will be the base year for this data. Information is also being added to the Calendar Year 2005. The data is incomplete at this time and a trend analysis can not be done for this report.

The cost of accidents as shown by Workers' Compensation Claims ended where it was forecast at \$14.4M. The number of claims filed for September is down. The total number of claims for Fiscal Year 2005 is also down.

This month's report highlights the initiatives to reduce the cost of Workers' Compensation to the Department. Several initiatives are on-going with more to begin in the next quarter.

Also included in this month's report is a summary of the results from bureau safety and occupational health program evaluations conducted in Fiscal Years 2004 and 2005. The Office of Occupational Safety and Health will work with each bureau to correct these issues. Four additional small bureaus will be assessed in 2006. The Office of Occupational Safety and Health has a schedule that ensures every bureau of the Department is evaluated once every three years.

Finally in this report is information about keeping warm to maintain a safe and healthful body temperature. The health section provides information on healthy eating, proper drinks to hydrate the body and proper dressing for cold weather.

October Report

Purpose. To provide information about the effectiveness of the Department's Occupational Safety and Health program. This report is based on the latest available workers' compensation data for the Department derived from employee compensation claims. Wellness information is also provided to assist employees in preparing for the fall and winter season. The Office of Occupational Safety and Health will publicize the hazards and recommendations in this report using the Department's web page. It will also work with bureau safety offices to further analyze the data and implement recommendations as appropriate for each bureau.

Discussion.

Accident Reporting. The Office of Occupational Safety and Health continues to gather accident data for Calendar Years, 2004 and 2005. The goal is to populate an accident log for the Department for Calendar Year 2004 by December 31, 2005 and for Calendar Year 2005 by February 15, 2006. Accident reports for Calendar Year 2006 will be collected starting January 1, 2006 and will continue through the end of the Calendar Year.

Recent Accidents and Incidents.

Office Fire. An employee left a candle burning in her office. The fire damaged the book case and a lamp next to the candle. The fire was extinguished before it caused serious damage or endangered the lives of other Department employees. The Department of Commerce follows the General Services Administration policy which prohibits lighted candles or open flames in offices.

Chemical Fire. A contractor mixed chemicals while performing an operation and left them in a single container. Later the chemicals caught fire damaging the container. The fire department arrived and was able to put the fire out before it caused additional damage. The Department's policy on mixing hazardous chemicals applies to contractors and employees alike. Mixing of chemicals should be avoided; however, if necessary once chemicals are used they should be disposed of properly.

Lightning Strike. A facility was struck by cloud-to-cloud lightning. Cloud to cloud lightning occurs when the discharge of lightning is between separated clouds rather than from a cloud to the ground. Although this lightning goes from cloud-to-cloud sometimes an object on the ground will attract part of the discharge to itself. The electricity from the lightning strike entered the facility through an unshielded coax cable. The cable was installed without proper grounding. Department equipment and the facility sustained over \$20,000 in damage. The equipment was reinstalled properly to prevent future lightning strikes from causing damages.

It is important to share information about incidents so that all Department personnel can learn from the lessons and not repeat them.

Worker's Compensation Claims Analysis. Workers' Compensation Claim Data tells us that the Monthly Total Recordable Case Incident Rate is going down again after an upward trend from June through August of 2005. The September 2005 rate is below the September 2004 rate. The run of this rate over time remains between 1 and 2, see figure 1.

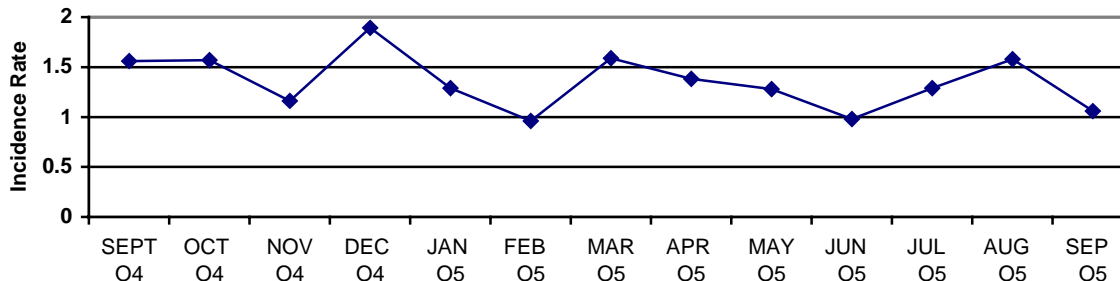


Figure 1. Monthly Total Recordable Workers' Compensation Case Incident Rate Trend

Total Case Incidence Rate is down from previous years. The downward trend needs to continue to an incident rate of 0.76 claims per 100 employees, see figure 2.

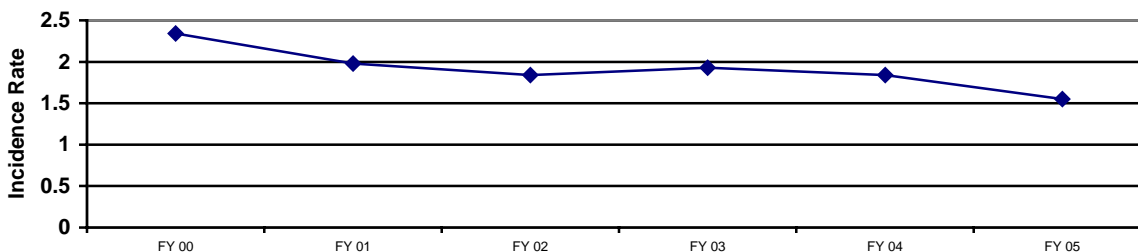


Figure 2. Total Workers' Compensation Case Incident Rate Trend

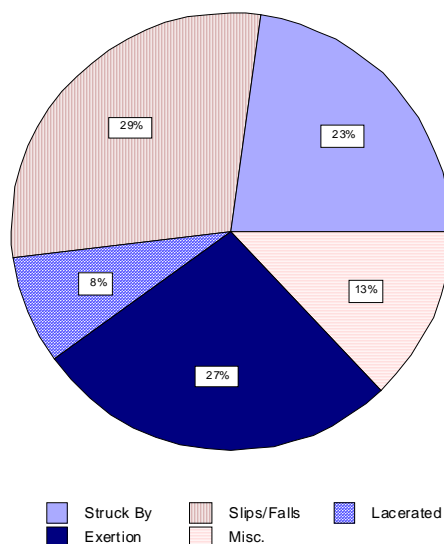


Figure 3. Workers' Compensation Claims by type for Fiscal Year 2005.

Figure 3 shows very little change in the types of accidents that resulted in claims from Fiscal Year 2004 to Fiscal Year 2005. The four main accident types that account for most of the accidents unfortunately are considered to be the most difficult to control and eliminate.

Workers Compensation Claims Management Initiatives.

An overall program improvement plan was developed that provides a description of improvements and a timeline for completion of these improvements.

The project plan is attached to this report.

Eighteen long term claims were reviewed this month. Claims were sent to the Office of Inspector General and Federal Occupational Health Services for further evaluation. Additional claims are now being reviewed to determine the potential to return the employee to work.

In the past the Department's workers' compensation contractor handled return to work cases by speaking directly to supervisors. This method has not been successful. In an effort to turn this program around the Office of Occupational Safety and Health has developed a new procedure to manage return-to-work cases. Effective November 1, 2005, the Department's workers' compensation contractor will notify the Director, Office of Occupational Safety and Health who will put together a return to work team consisting of the employee's supervisor, the division manager, bureau budget office and human resources representatives. This team will analyze the conditions under which an employee can return to work and conclude whether it is best to return the employee to work or deny the request leaving the employee out on compensation. If there is not a job within the injured employee's bureau the Director, Office of Occupational Safety and Health will coordinate with human resources personnel across the Department to locate a job. The Human Resources Bulletin explaining these new procedures will be published in November.

The Office of Occupational Safety and Health has compiled a list of workers' compensation claims. A search is being made of Department of Labor records to indicate claims on the list that have third party involvement in the injury or illness. A memo will be sent with the names and claim numbers of these employees who have third party involvement to the Department of Labor and encourage them to investigate the third party liability and take steps where warranted to get money from the third parties for their involvement in the injury and illness. This money should be returned to the Department.

Department of Labor Initiative. The Department of Labor does not have the year-end data for the Safety, Health and Return-to-Employment (SHARE) Initiative that prevents the Department from determining its success with the goals for Fiscal Year 2005. The Office of Occupational Safety and Health will continue to work with the Department of Labor to get this information.

Bureau Evaluations.

In Fiscal Year 2004 the Office of Occupational Safety and Health performed four oversight evaluations of the major bureaus within the Department. During Fiscal Year 2005 the Office of Occupational Safety and Health performed oversight evaluations of four smaller bureaus within the Department. The evaluations were conducted to ensure the effectiveness of the safety and health programs and determine if the bureaus were compliant with federal requirements.

The reports from the assessments were evaluated and trends were identified and included in previous monthly reports. When a comparison was made between the two fiscal year's evaluation summaries there were some constant themes identified.

In several bureaus no written worksite policy on safety and health existed. Many bureaus were using the Department policies; however, in many cases the Department policies were not specific enough to serve as policy for what the bureaus were actually doing. It is recommend that all bureaus review the use of the Department safety policy and where it does not adequately serve the bureau's needs, supplemental guidance should be developed.

Also noted was that formal training was lacking at all levels. To help the bureaus resolve this issue the Office of Occupational Safety and Health has begun offering safety and health training. Classes for supervisors have already been scheduled for the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Minority Business Development Agency, and for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Executive Officer Conference. Coordination has been made for the Department's workers' compensation contractor to have an employee at each of these training sessions. Additional coordination was made with the Department of Labor's Office of Workers' Compensation Program for a three day course on the federal workers' compensation program for bureau safety and health as well as human resource management personnel.

The Office of Occupational Safety and Health will work with all bureaus during Fiscal Year 2006 to correct deficiencies in the previous evaluations and will conduct evaluations of four additional bureaus.

Health and Wellness. There is one topic for this month's health and wellness section. Keeping warm is the key to maintaining good health.

Keeping Warm

Keeping warm is more than just putting on a coat or turning up the heat. If the body temperature dips even a little the body may begin to suffer from Hypothermia. When this occurs the blood within the body begins to move to the torso to protect the organs. This leaves the extremities feeling cold. Furthermore, the lower temperature often causes the mind to become confused and light. This winter season prevent hypothermia. It all begins with a healthy life style.

- Eating well-balanced meals will help the body stay warm by providing nutrients that allow the body to build heat.
- Remember to drink liquids to keep the body hydrated. Drink warm, sweet beverages or broth to help maintain the body temperature. With dietary restrictions, ask a doctor about warm drinks for particular needs.
- Limit the consumption of beverages containing alcohol or caffeine. Drinks with these cause the body to lose heat rapidly through urination and may cause dehydration.

When the weather is extremely cold, and especially if there are high winds, stay indoors, if possible. If outside trips are needed make them as brief as possible, and remember to dress for the weather. Adults and children should wear:

- clothing in layers so that it can be removed or added to adjust the body temperature,
- a hat to reduce the amount of heat lost from the body through the head,
- a scarf or knit mask to cover face and mouth,
- sleeves that are snug at the wrist,
- mittens (they are warmer than gloves), and
- water resistant coat and boots.

When it comes to dressing in layers it is best to listen to the experts. They suggest the following:

- The first layer of clothing, next to your skin, should “wick” perspiration away from the skin to keep the body dry and comfortable. This base layer should be lightweight and easily laundered, such as polypropylene, silk, nylon, or polyester.
 - Cotton is not a good base layer because when the body sweats, it gets wet and stays wet, which can make the body cold.
 - Silk is good first layer material for those in a place where doors open and close frequently. This can be worn comfortably under trousers, slacks, dresses, and blouses as a thin insulating piece.
- The next layer or layers should trap warm air escaping from your body and hold onto it. This layer should be composed of breathable fabrics that provide warmth even when wet – synthetic pile fleece or wool, for instance.
- The final layer or clothing should consist of breathable, wind-and water-resistant garments such as a jacket and pants. These should be large enough to permit layering underneath and allow for unhindered movement and vision. The fabric should provide protection from wind, rain, sleet, snow, and keep cold air and moisture from penetrating into the insulation layers.

Now is the time to prepare by stocking up on warm beverages; making sure all family members have coats, gloves, scarves, and goulashes. Winter can be fun with the proper preparation.

Future health and wellness topics will include:

November 2005 – Preventing alcohol abuse

December 2005 – Exercise

January 2006 – Stress